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THE Princess Virginia

By C. N. and A. M. WILLIAMSON,
Authors of "The Lightning Conductor," "Rosemary in Search of a Father," Etc.

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(CONTINUED.)

He had thought it a sacrifice to suggest a morganatic marriage. Now a voice seemed to say in his ear: "The price you offered was not enough. Is love worth all to you or not?" And he answered: "It is worth all. I will offer all, yet not count it a sacrifice. That is love, and nothing less is love."

A white light broke before his eyes like a meteor bursting, and the voice in his ear spoke words that sent a flame through his veins.

"I will do it," he said. "Who is there among my people who will dare say 'No' to their emperor's 'Yes'? I will make a new law. I will be a law unto myself."

His face, that had been pale, was flushed. He tore up the unfinished telegram and wrote another, which he signed "Leo, the Chamois Hunter." Then, when he had handed in the message and paid, there was but just time to buy his ticket, engage a whole first class compartment for himself and dash into it before his train was due to start.

As it moved slowly out of the big station Leopold's brain rang with the noble music of his great resolve. He could see nothing, think of nothing, but that. His arms ached to clasp his love. His lips, cheated last night, already felt her kisses, for she would give them now, and she would give herself. He was treading the past of an empire underfoot in the hope of a future with her, and every throb of the engine was taking him nearer to the threshold of that future.

But such moments of supreme exaltation come rarely in a lifetime. The heart of man or woman could not beat on for long with such wild music for accompaniment, and so it was that as the moments passed the song of the emperor's blood fell to a minor key. He thought passionately of Virginia, but he thought of his country as well and tried to weigh the effect upon others of the thing that he was prepared to do. There was no one on earth whom Leopold of Rhaetia need fear, but there was one to whom he owed much, one whom it would be grievous to offend.

In his father's day one man, old even then, had built upon the foundations of a tragic past a great and prosperous nation. This man had been to Leopold what his father had never been and, without the magic power of inspiring warm affection, had instilled respect and gratitude in the breast of an enthusiastic boy.

"Poor old Von Breitstein!" the emperor sighed. "The country is his idol—the country with all the old traditions. He'll feel this break sorely. I'd spare him if I could. But I can't live my life for him."

He sighed again and looked up, frowning, at a sudden sound which meant intrusion.

Like a spirit called from the deep, there stood the chancellor at the door between Leopold's compartment and the one adjoining.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IRON HEART was dressed in the long double breasted gray overcoat and the soft gray hat in which all snapshot photographs (no others had ever been taken) showed the chancellor of Rhaetia.

At sight of the emperor off came the famous hat, baring the bald dome of the fine old head, fringed with hair of curiously mingled black and white.

"Good day, your majesty," he said, with no sign of surprise in his voice or face.

The train rocked going around a curve, and it was with difficulty that the chancellor kept his footing. But he stood rigidly erect, supporting himself in the doorway until the emperor, with more politeness than enthusiasm, invited him to enter and be seated.

"I'm glad you're well enough to travel, chancellor," said Leopold. "We had none too encouraging an account of you from Captain von Breitstein."

"I travel because you travel, your majesty," replied the old man. "It is kind of you to tolerate me here, and I appreciate it."

Now they sat facing each other, and the young man, fighting down a sense of guilt, familiar to him in boyish days when about to be taken to task by the chancellor, gazed fixedly at the hard, clever face on which the afternoon sun scored the detail of each wrinkle.

"Indeed!" was the emperor's only answer.

"Your majesty, I have served you and your father before you well, I hope—faithfully, I know. I think you trust me."

"No man more. But this sounds a portentous preface. Is it possible you imagine it necessary to 'lead up' to a subject if I can please myself by doing you a favor?"

"If I have seemed to lead up to what I wish to say, your majesty, it is only for the sake of explanation. You are wondering, no doubt, how I knew you would travel today and in this train—

also why I have ventured to follow. Your intention I learned by accident." The chancellor did not explain by what diplomacy that "accident" had been brought about. "Wishing much to talk over with you a pressing matter that should not be delayed, I took this liberty and seized this opportunity."

"Some men would in my place pretend that business of their own had brought them and that the train had been chosen by chance. But your majesty knows me as a blunt man when I serve him not as a diplomat, but as a friend. I'm not one to work in the dark with those who trust me, and I want your majesty to know the truth."



"Good day, your majesty," he said.

(Which perhaps he did, but not the whole truth.)

"Your raise my curiosity," said Leopold.

"Then have I your indulgence to speak frankly not entirely as a humble subject to his emperor, but as an old man to a young man?"

"I'd have you speak as a friend," said Leopold. But a slight constraint hardened his voice as he prepared himself for something disagreeable.

"I've had a letter from the crown prince of Hungary. It has come to his ears that there is a certain reason for your majesty's delay in following up the first overtures for an alliance with his family. Malicious tongues have whispered that your majesty's attentions are otherwise engaged, and the young Adalbert has addressed me in a friendly way, begging that the rumor may be contradicted or confirmed."

"I'm not sure that negotiations had gone far enough to give him the right to be inquisitive," returned Leopold, flushing.

The chancellor spread out his old veined hands in a gesture of appeal. "I fear," he said, "that in my anxiety for your majesty's welfare and the good of Rhaetia I may have exceeded my instructions. My one excuse is that I believed your mind to be definitely made up. I still believe it to be so. I would listen to no one who should try to persuade me of the contrary, and I will write Adalbert—"

"You must get yourself and me out of the scrape as best you can, since you admit you got us into it," broke in the emperor, with an uneasy laugh. "If Princess Virginia of Baumburg-Drippe is as charming as she is said to be, her difficulty will be in choosing a husband, not in getting one. For once, my dear chancellor, gossip has told the truth, and I wouldn't pay the princess so poor a compliment as to ask for her hand when I've no heart left to give her in exchange for it. There's some one else!"

"It is of that some one else I would venture to speak, your majesty. Gossip has named her, May I?"

"I'll save you the trouble, for I'm not ashamed that the common fate has overtaken me—common because every man loves once before he dies, and yet uncommon because no man ever loved a woman so worthy, Chancellor, there's no woman in the world like Miss Helen Mowbray, the lady to whom I owe my life."

"It's natural you should be grateful, your majesty, but—"

"It's natural I should be in love."

"Natural that a young man inexperienced in affairs of the heart should mistake warm gratitude for love. Impossible that the mistake should be allowed to continue."

Leopold's eyes grew dark. "In such a connection," he said, "it would be better not to mention the word 'mistake.' I'm glad you are here, for now you can learn from me my intentions toward that lady."

"Intentions, did you say, your majesty? I fear I grow hard of hearing."

"At least you will never grow slow of understanding. I did speak of my intentions toward Miss Mowbray."

"You would give the lady some magnificent estate, some splendid acknowledgment?"

"Whether splendid or not would be a matter of opinion," laughed the emperor. "I shall offer her a present of myself."

The old man had been sitting with his chin sunk into his short neck, peering out from under his brows in a way he had, but he lifted his head suddenly, with a look in his eyes like that of an animal who scents danger from an unexpected quarter.

"Your majesty," he exclaimed, "you

are your father's son, you are Rhaetian, and your standard of honor!"— "I hope to marry Miss Mowbray," Leopold cut him short.

The chancellor's jaw dropped, and he grew pale. "I had dreamed of nothing as bad as this," he blurted out, with no thought or wish to sugar the truth. "I feared a young man's rashness. I dreaded scandal. But, forgive me, your majesty. For you a morganatic marriage would be madness!"

"A morganatic marriage I did think of at first, but on second thoughts I saw it would be ungrateful."

"Ah, yes, to the country which expects so much of you."

"No, to the woman who has the right to all or nothing. I will make her empress of Rhaetia."

With a cry the chancellor sprang up. His eyes glared like the eyes of a bull who receives the death stroke. His working lips and the hollow sound in his throat alarmed the emperor.

"No, your majesty, no!" he panted. "But I say yes," Leopold answered, "and let no man give me nay. I've thought it all out. I will make her a countess first. Then she shall be made my empress."

"Your majesty, it is not possible."

"Take care, chancellor."

"She has been deceiving you. She has neither the birth, the position nor the name she claims to have, and I can prove it."

"You are mad, Von Breitstein," the emperor flung at him. "That can be your only excuse for such words."

"I am not mad, but I am old and wise, your majesty. Today you have made me feel that I am very old. Punish me as you will for my frankness. My work for you and yours is nearly done. Cheerfully will I submit to my dismissal if only this last effort in your service may save the ship of state from wreck. I would not make an accusation which I could not prove. And I can prove that the two English ladies who have been staying at Schloss Lyndalberg are not the persons they pretend to be."

"Who has been lying to you?" cried Leopold, who held between clenched hands the temper he vowed not to lose with this old man.

"To me, no one. To your majesty, to society in Kronburg, two adventuresses have lied."

The emperor caught his breath. "If you were a young man I would kill you for that," he said. "I know you would. As it is, my life is yours. But before you take it, for God's sake, for your father's sake, hear me out!"

Leopold did not speak for a moment, but stared at the vanishing landscape, which he saw through a red haze. "Very well," he said at last; "I will hear you, because I fear nothing you can say."

"When I heard of your majesty's admiration for a certain lady," the chancellor began quickly lest the emperor should change his mind, "I looked for her name and her mother's in Burke's Peerage. There I found Lady Mowbray, widow of a dead baron of that ilk, mother of a son still a child and of one daughter, a young woman with many names and twenty-eight years."

"This surprised me, as the Miss Mowbray I had seen at the birthday ball looked no more than eighteen and, I was told, confessed to twenty. The Mowbrays, I learned by a little further research in Burke, were distantly connected by marriage with the family of Baumburg-Drippe. This seemed an odd coincidence in the circumstances. But, acting as duty bade me act, I wired to two persons—Baron von Sark, your majesty's ambassador to Great Britain, and the crown prince of Hungary, the brother of Princess Virginia."

"What did you telegraph?" asked the emperor jealously.

"Nothing compromising to your majesty, you may well believe. I inquired of Adalbert if he had English relations, a Lady Mowbray and daughter, Helen, traveling in Rhaetia, and I begged that if so he would describe their appearance by telegram. To Von Sark I said that particulars by wire concerning the widow of Lord Mowbray and daughter, Helen, would put me under personal obligation. Both these messages I sent off night before last. Yesterday I received Adalbert's answer, this morning Von Sark's. They are here."

And the chancellor tapped the breast of his gray coat. "Will your majesty read them?"

"If you wish," replied Leopold at his haughtiest and coldest.

The old man unbuttoned his coat and produced a coroneted pocketbook, a souvenir of friendship on his last birthday from the emperor. Leopold saw it and remembered, as the chancellor hoped he would.

"Here are the telegrams, your majesty," he said. "The first one is from the crown prince of Hungary."

"Have no idea where Lady Mowbray and daughter are traveling; may be Rhaetia or north pole," Adalbert had written, with characteristic flippancy. "Have seen neither for eight years and scarcely know them. But Lady M. tall, brown old party, with nose like hobbyhorse; Helen dark, nose like mother's, wears glasses."

With no betrayal of feeling, Leopold laid the telegram on the red plush seat and unfolded the other.

"Pardon delay," the Rhaetian ambassador's message began. "Have been making inquiries. Lady Mowbray has been widow for ten years. Not rich. During son's minority has let her town and country houses. Lives much abroad. Very high church, intellectual, at present in Calcutta, where daughter Helen, twenty-eight, not pretty, is lately engaged to marry middle aged judge of some distinction."

"So"—and the emperor threw aside the second bit of paper—"it is on such slight grounds as these that a man of the world can label two ladies 'adventuresses.'"

The chancellor was bitterly disappointed. He had counted on the impression which these telegrams must make, and unless Leopold were acting it was now certain that love had driven him out of his senses.

But if the emperor were mad he must be treated accordingly, and the old statesman condescended to "bluff." "There is still more to tell," he said. "If your majesty has not heard enough, but I think when you have reflected you will not wish for more. It is clear that the women calling themselves Mowbrays have had the audacity to present themselves here under false colors. They have either deceived Lady Lambert, who introduced them to Rhaetian society, or, still more likely, they have cleverly forged their letters of introduction."

"Why didn't you telegraph to Lady Lambert while your hand was in?" sneered Leopold.

"I did, your majesty, or, rather, not knowing her present address, I wired a friend of mine, an acquaintance of hers, begging him to make inquiries without using my name, but I have not yet received an answer to that telegram."

"Until you do I should think that even a cynic like yourself might give two defenseless, inoffensive ladies the benefit of the doubt."

"Inoffensive," echoed Von Breitstein—"inoffensive when they came to this country to ensnare your majesty through the girl's beauty! But, great heaven, it is true that I am growing old! I have forgotten to ask your majesty whether you have gone so far as to mention the word marriage to Miss Mowbray?"

"I'll answer that question by another. Do you really believe that Miss Mowbray came to Rhaetia to 'entrap' me?"

"I do, though I scarcely think that even her ambition flew as high as you are encouraging it to soar."

"In case you're right she would have been overjoyed with an offer of morganatic marriage."

"Overjoyed is a poor word. Overwhelmed might be nearer."

"Yet I tell you she refused me last night and is leaving Rhaetia today rather than listen to further entreaties."

Leopold bent forward to launch this thunderbolt, his brown hands on his knees, his eyes eager. The memories, half bitter, half sweet, called up by his own words caused Virginia to appear more beautiful, more desirable, ever than before.

He was delighted with the expression of the chancellor's face. "Now, what arguments have you left?" he broke out in the brief silence.

"All I had before and many new ones, for what your majesty has said shows the lady more ambitious, more astute, therefore more dangerous, than I had guessed. She staked everything on the power of her charms, and she might have won had you not an old servant who wouldn't be fooled by the wretchedness of a fair Helen."

"She has won," said Leopold, then quickly: "God forgive me for chiding in with your bitter humor, as if she'd played a game. By simply being herself, she has won me, such as I am. She proved that if she cares at all it's for the man and not the emperor, since she called the offer you think so significant an insult. Yes, chancellor, that was the word she used, and it was almost the last she said to me, which is the reason I'm traveling today. And none of your boasted 'proofs' can hold me back."

"By heaven, your majesty must look upon yourself from the point of view you credit to the girl! You forget the emperor in the man."

"The two need not be separated."

"Love indeed makes men blind and spares not the eyes of emperors."

"I've pledged myself to bear with you, chancellor."

"And I know you'll keep your word. I must speak for Rhaetia and your better self. You are following this lady to give her your empire for a toy."

"She must first accept the emperor as her husband."

"A lady who has so poor a name for her own that she steals one which doesn't belong to her—the nation won't bear it."

"You speak for yourself, not for Rhaetia," said Leopold. "Though I'm not so old as you by half your years, I believe I can judge my people better than you do. The law which bids an emperor of Rhaetia match with royalty is an unwritten law, a law solely of customs handed down through the generations. I'll not spoil my life by submitting to its yoke, since by breaking it the nation gains, as I do. I could go to the world's end and not find a woman as worthy to be my wife and empress of Rhaetia as Helen Mowbray."

"You have never seen Princess Virginia."

"I've no wish to see her. There's but one woman for me, and I swear to you if I lose her I'll go to my grave unmarried. Let the crown fall to my uncle's son. I'll not perjure myself even for Rhaetia."

The chancellor bowed his head and held up his hands, for by that gesture alone could he express his despair.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

Office Boy's Little Coup.

The office boy in a downtown office has framed up the following schedule of the firm's office hours, which is displayed in a prominent place on the wall: "9-10 reserved for book agents and people with various things to sell, 10-11 for insurance agents, 11-12 bore with long stories, 1-2 solicitors for church and charitable institutions, 2-3 discuss sporting news with callers, 3-5 miscellaneous social visitors. N. B.—We transact our own business at night."—Cleveland Plain Dealer.

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